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THE COUNTRY CHURCH

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# The Country Sunday School

— BY —

FRANKLIN McELFRESH, Ph. D.

INTERNATIONAL  
TEACHER-TRAINING  
SECRETARY

THE CONGREGATIONAL  
SUNDAY SCHOOL AND PUBLISHING SOCIETY  
MISSIONARY DEPARTMENT

JAMES P. O'BRIEN  
EDUCATIONAL SECRETARY FOR THE SOUTHWEST  
4128 CAMPBELL ST. KANSAS CITY, MO.

# The Country Sunday School

AN ADDRESS BEFORE THE MISSOURI STATE SUNDAY SCHOOL CONVENTION AT CHILLICOTHE, MO. BY FRANKLIN MCELFRISH, PH. D., INTERNATIONAL TEACHER-TRAINING SECRETARY.

## 1. The Country Conscience.

The greatest asset in America today is the Country conscience. The city life of America furnishes brilliant men and women, abre with all the intense restlessness of modern life, and no more brilliant groups are to be found anywhere in the world than among the business and professional leaders in the American city. But it is said by Missouri's foremost citizen, "The American city has more aggressive rottenness and less aggressive patriotism than anywhere else in the world." If all America were governed like New York, like San Francisco, or like Chicago, if it had leaders everywhere like Cincinnati and Philadelphia have endured, then the world would be studying with horror the problem of disease, corruption and death in this youngest and greatest Republic.

But the fast-growing city is not the nation. The city empties its sewers into the ocean, but the ocean is not polluted; it has a self-cleansing power. The life of our nation is pure and strong, because the graft, the debauchery, the ignorance of the city have not contaminated the blood of the Nation. Where do such leaders as Hughes and Folk and Hanley get their backing? What will the moral plane of Illinois be if Chicago, with its United Societies, dictates? What city aids Gov. Hughes in his stand against



gambling? Who defeated a true friend of temperance, Gov. Harris, of Ohio? The country vote is the tide that sends its waves of moral power dashing away the reeking filth of the brewery and the vice-breeding saloon. Over the smoke and dust, over the languor and crime of the city, sweeps the air of the country, pure with ozone; life-giving as from the pine forests of the North.

The country Sunday School offers the most fruitful field for active righteousness to be found in our great agricultural States. If you want to mould the active life of tomorrow in this land, here is the spot ready for the formative will. It was Mr. Bryan who said that men who will govern this country in thirty years from now are husking corn in Nebraska. Doubtless, some would think, this prophecy locates the center just a little too far west. Of the men who will handle this world in twenty-five years, a large group is no doubt today in the country life of this Central West. It is not an accident that the country boy walks out to leadership among men. The city is the hot-bed life; it forces growth fast and rank and often sickly. The country lies open to the sun; its growth is slow, often hindered, but rough and strong. The city furnishes the smart boy, and the smart boy is usually hopeless for large manhood. He has had his growth under glass, by steam pipes, and wilts when set out in the wind and sun. The green-house sends out head lettuce in the Winter and Marshal Niel roses—the premature and the brilliant. The open field, despite flood and frost, grows the corn and the wheat. The high-browed men of destiny, who

can work and wait and think and fight, are as likely to be found roughing it on the farms as anywhere in the world. Watch these boys; they are trained to work; they have their feet on the earth; they are sane and sinewy; they have clear individuality; they are grim and ambitious; their hearts and heads are open yet, if we can only find the kind of men and women to speak the words to them that will fill their souls and flood their lives with the light, that will lead to the highest expressions of Christian patriotism. This is the chance for service offered the teacher of the country Sunday School.

## 2. The Country Sunday School an Undeveloped Power.

The Country Sunday School is today a mighty force for pure religion, but much of its splendid energy is wasted and much of its great opportunities unheeded. What vast fields of wealth there are raw and undeveloped all about us! We are burning up our coal fields and letting the water power of our rivers run unused. Destructive floods are stripping the soil of its richest values. We are ploughing the earth to impoverishment, while the precious nitrates are allowed to waste. We are doing noble work in calling the Church to stand on the high places and lift its eyes to whole tribes and nations far away who are white to the harvest. But we are often neglecting the boys and girls of our own tongue and race—stock who live at our very doors. We have churches enough in the Central West—some places, indeed, we have too many. It is a struggle for existence. We can hardly get a glimpse of real Christianity for the

competing churches in their pathetic competition. Some consolidation must come. We need a little more of the trust idea applied to religion and applied to the country church; and yet, with all our churches, there are many neglected families. Organization for mission work in one's own neighborhood is, in many places, the first duty, and the duty entirely overlooked. Seldom will they come to church and school unless sought in their own homes; and by an unpaid worker. We have these backward and overlooked children within easy reach of our country churches, and the men and women in the country churches, busy as they are, need this discipline of service. We need the people who need us. How many times the feast is set, the table is spread, and the guests, some of them from highways and hedges, must be compelled to come. They must be compelled by a sympathetic, tireless, organized effort or they will not come.

### 3. The Difficulties of the Country Work.

*Small Number.* If every Sunday School worker would search homes, and if every visitor had the glittering eye of Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, this country Sunday School would even then often be small in number. In many of our States, the country townships are steadily decreasing in population. The district school, where once romping children by the score played Black Man, and boys played baseball, is now often a lonely place where ten or twelve listless children spend the time.

There is enthusiasm in numbers. There is

contagion in a crowd. We talk about bigness all the time today, and we belittle small things. It takes a noble type of courage and rare skill to hold a high standard of work in a Sunday School of twenty or thirty pupils, and yet this is the limit of child attendance for many a school in the country.

*Separation and Irregularity.* Wind and rough weather, distance and mud, are serious problems for the country worker. When ten stormy Sundays in one Winter drive their keen winds through the best-laid plans, and their clouds cast a gloom over the warmest enthusiast, it is hard to keep the cheer and courage necessary to successful work. These wide separations make hard conditions. Groups of faithful and earnest teachers are scattered, their plans overthrown by long delays, and their hopes chilled by wide separations.

#### 4. Advantages

##### Individual Work

The ideal class for real work is from six to ten members. In some of the largest schools in the intermediate department the arrangement is one teacher to nine pupils. There is enthusiasm in a crowd, but sometimes there is not much else. For real instruction, for real drill of the mind, for contact of heart with heart, for reading the inner life, the small class must always be the standard. The noisy chorus of the crowd is fascinating, but the deepest work of the world will ever be done in small groups. The teacher has here the open door. He can know the whole mental and moral crisis of each life. He can be the friend and counselor of every pupil. He

can deal with them one at a time, and in this individual work, reach the richest results in character building. There is a story told of a Scotch minister who complained to Dr. Chalmers about the smallness of his parish. But the great minister replied by saying: "Are there not as many as you will want to give account for at the day of judgment?" With this high sense of responsibility for each pupil as a person, the small class will always be the ideal for the true teacher.

### Social Equality

In the country there may be real fellowship. There are kindly and gracious relations between the richer and poorer found nowhere else. There is a common meeting place for the whole community in the country church. The streets and alleys and avenues of the city cut it up into social sections and are as impassable as the gulf between Dives and Lazarus. But there is respect for humanity itself in the country; and in its plainer church life, every one gets a handshake and a word of kindly inquiry. They know one another and are glad at the sight of neighborly faces. The home life is understood by all, and a sincere teacher may bind the pupils around him on the terms of common understanding and cordial friendship. This simple life of the higher type is real comradeship. The hired workers eat at the table, ride in the surrey, and are treated like folks. These people have lived in the same community for years and years. They have a family history. They are bound by ties of blood, by common sorrows and successes to those about them. In the city, too

often, the family has moved and moved until it has lost all connection with the past. It has no history. It simply exists and moves again.

The country Sunday School workers do not appreciate how much is made ready to their hands in the natural and kindly conditions of farm life. It ought to be possible to bring every child into the Sunday School and unite the whole neighborhood through its churches in religious education.

#### A Certain Air of Reverence

The atmosphere of country life is often dull and chill in its indifference to religion, but it is very seldom antagonistic. There we find a reverence for the Bible, the church and the minister, persuasive and profound. This is the result of the heroic service of the Christian pioneers. The traditions of the family regarding religion are sympathetic and reverent even in the face of practical neglect. In this way is the ground prepared for the seed sowing. Briars and thorns and stony ground are there and plenty of them, but the atmosphere of reverence hangs over the stony earth and makes possible another springtime of seed sowing unto harvest.

#### 5. Possibilities.

*Leadership.* This is the one thing needful everywhere. All causes succeed because somebody makes them succeed. It is always a question of persons at last, and the real question must be not "what," but "who." We have the men and women in every community capable of this religious leadership. They are morally and mentally fit. Often they do not know

their duty. Any urgent and overmastering sense of duty is not upon them at all. They are untrained; they are slow of speech; they are cumbered with many cares; their mouths are full of excuses; yet I insist that the country communities are very few in which we have not the leaders; and again, I insist that these leaders have time for the work; they must hear the call. Many of them are burdened house-wives and care-worn farmers, yet they have the time and strength and ability. They are prompt at the market; they are ready for every other kind of work, and they can be punctual and faithful at the Church of Christ when once they see the great interest involved there.

The farm life is counted a splendid avocation for rich men, but a tread-mill vocation for the actual workers. The gentleman farmer, who drives to the fields at his leisure or watches the herds from his automobile, finds the color of the trees, and waving of the grass, and the smell of the ploughed field a delight. But the man who knows only the grind of its toil finds it hard, often bitter. Now for these men and women, the real workers in the farm and field, to rise to the mental grasp of a great idea, is to escape from drudgery. What can break the monotony for the man-with-the-hoe like insight into the world's greatest book? What can give dignity to a plain and toiling life like sympathy for the spiritual aspirations of young hearts? Give them a larger interest in life; give these workers an avocation, and let it not be some cheap leisure, but some great uplift, and this life is ennobled.

The Bible sprang from the agonies of a shep-

herd's soul, from the triumph of a herdsman's faith, and the glory of a fisherman's love. It is a religion that keeps close to the ground, and interprets the daily life of sincere men who live near to nature. Let these teachers go to the lyrics of David, the patriotism of Isaiah, the raptures of St. John and the reasoning of Paul, and life will become rich and cheering for them. The profound thinkers and brilliant writers of the world are at their service in a very ready way to interpret the whole Bible to them.

The epoch-making years of the Anglo-Saxons have been the times when this virile stock was aroused to the fullness of its powers by the Bible. The days of Cromwell, of Wycliffe, of Luther, of Cotton Mather and of John Knox, yes, the days of Lincoln, are the red-letter days of liberty and they are marked by the power of the Bible over the human mind. One of the great days in the history of religion and liberty is on record when a vine dresser, Amos, stood up before the King of Israel to speak the burden of his soul. "Prophet," said he, "I am no prophet, only a plain farmer, but I come by God's call to tell you the truth." This was the day-dawn of Hebrew prophecy.

The Bible can best be interpreted in the country. It sprang from a pastoral people; it is full of the figures of the soil and the flock, and the field. Its richest images are from the plain face of nature and the homely life of the humble cottages. And nowhere have better results ever been reached than when the family life grouped around the Bible, like that pictured in Burns' "Cotter's Saturday Night."

The country preacher ought to be a Sunday



School specialist. He ought to know the full truth about the development of the modern Sunday School. His life would be wonderfully enriched by the training of teachers. He has the time, he has the material at hand. The teachers are needed. In many cases he is the man to do the work.

Many of our most successful teachers of teachers are pastors, some of them carrying the burden of large churches, but by wise economy of time, leading their Sunday School teachers out into pastures new.

The Home department is splendidly adapted to the needs of country life. Its faithful use, after thorough visitation, would bind many a lonely and neglected life to the Word of God, and recall many a one to the Sunday School who has neglected and well nigh forgotten its teachings.

The adult class can put vigor and joy into the young manhood and womanhood of a rural neighborhood. Its splendid successes are covered by no city patent. The social, athletic and business methods, and all its emphasis on personal work, can be carried out finely in the country. The teacher-training class can be organized, and meet in a home or in the church, with social features, and become a center of new life for heart and brain, as the young men and women learn the best that the leaders in

Religious Education are giving the world to-day. The country church may be divided by curtains, and secure most of the advantages of the modern departmental school. There is nothing too good for the Country Sunday School, and little they cannot gain for themselves if they will. All this depends upon wise plans, prayerful leadership and true devotion to Christian education.









